

WRATH AGAINST THE RELIGIOUS JEW

Series: Righteousness Revealed

Romans 2:17-29

Chadron Berean Church

On Saturday mornings I like to cook breakfast for my family. My three amigos (about to be four soon) like to sit on the kitchen counter and watch dad cook breakfast. It must be entertaining for them, but I don't know why. Maybe they're waiting to see if I'll burn the house down. But I guess you could say we're a bit old-fashioned because we still like to eat that canned corned beef hash. My kids love it. So imagine how disappointed we would be if I went to open a can of corned beef hash only to find green beans inside. The label on the outside said corned beef hash but the contents on the inside—not what I want to eat with my eggs! My kids would plead with mom to cook breakfast instead. Well, labels and contents are sort of what we're going to talk about today from Romans 2:17-20 as Paul now goes after the Jews who do not live up to their name and are under the wrath of God as well, right along with the pagan **Gentile** (1:18-32) and the **moralist** (2:1-16).

Remember we are in what you might call the “sin section” or “bad news section” of the book of Romans where the Apostle Paul is presenting **the universal need for justification** in that all men are condemned by God as sinners. That's the bad news. Romans is a book about the good news of *the gift of God's righteousness* granted to those who have faith in Christ, but we first need to understand the bad news that we are *unrighteous and in need* of that gift.

I. **THE LAW (TORAH) CANNOT SAVE THE JEW. (2:17-24)**

17 But if you bear the name “Jew” and rely upon the Law and boast in God, 18 and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, 19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, 21 you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? 22 You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? 24 For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” just as it is written.

Last week I presented the situation that if you were to die and stand before God and God were to ask you, “Why should I let you into My heaven?” What would you say? You have to be careful how you answer that because how you answer that question reveals *what you are relying on for your salvation*—what you are *relying on* to make you right with God. The pagan willfully rejects righteousness (1:18-32). The moralist relies upon his own self-righteousness (2:1-16). The Jew, however, tended to rely on his religious works. Think of like a stool with four legs. He was trusting in four legs to hold him up: **1) the Law, 2) circumcision, 3) natural birth, and 4) argumentation.** In chapter 2:17-3:8, Paul is going to kick out every one of those four legs from underneath the religious Jew to expose his condemnation and need for God's righteousness, starting with the **Law**.

We know Paul is speaking to the Jew because in his **diatribe** style of discussion he addresses an imaginary **Jew** directly. Notice verse 17, “*But if you bear the name Jew.*” It might be translated “*but if you’re called a Jew,*” or to better fit my opening analogy, “*but if you’re labeled a Jew.*” The word Jew comes from the tribe of *Judah*, which comes from the Hebrew root *yada*, which means “**to praise**.”¹ It’s a name they were proud of. They believed anyone who bore the name brought *praise* to God. Paul is thinking of the meaning of the name “Jew” when he writes this section.² He’s using a play on words. Paul was in effect saying, “Okay, you call yourself “Praising God,” but does your life *really* give praise to God? Do the contents of your heart and life match the label?” In a series of “if” clauses in verses 17-20, Paul lists several advantages (cf. 3:1-2) the Jews had over the Gentiles (non-Jews) that should have made them a God-honoring people.

A. The advantages of being a Jew. (vv. 17-20; cf. 3:1-2)

They had a unique covenant relationship with God that no one else had (cf. Psalm 147:20) and God gave them the **Law** to carry that out. God entrusted them/that nation with the Law. The Law, Paul says, is the **embodiment of knowledge and truth**. They were **instructed** out of it. The word for instructed (*katēcheō*) is where we get our word for catechism. They’d been “catechized” in the Law, growing up constant exposure to it in the home, temple, and synagogue. Therefore, they could **know His will**, be **guides to the blind** Gentiles, **lights to those in darkness**, and **teachers of the immature**. These are all things the Jews would’ve called themselves and were to be. That’s why God placed them on the map where He did. Israel is located at what has been called the epicenter of the world. They’re located in the heart of the ancient world in the only green stretch of land there. People were to travel through Israel, see how God had blessed them and want to know more about their God. They were to show the world the way to and ways of the one true God.

And Paul is arguing that while they have the advantage of the Law, it’s not enough to take care of their sin problem. They relied upon the Law it a little bit too much—more so than originally intended by God. They basically turned the Law into an idol and savior. They rested their hope upon their *possession* of the Law, thinking themselves exempt from condemnation simply for having it and/or keeping it. However, Paul will teach that the Law, while good and helpful and if they kept it would be God-honoring, it *only increased their accountability and responsibility before God*. They were using the Law to try and conjure up their own righteousness, but the main purpose was to show them they aren’t righteous. Its main purpose was to **reveal sin** and **show us our need for a Savior** (3:19-20; 7:1-25; Gal. 3). No one has ever been justified/saved by keeping the Law. So their confidence in keeping it actually became their condemnation. To keep them from thinking they could keep the Law to be saved, he does a little interrogation in verses 21-24.

B. The interrogation of the Jews. (vv. 21-22)

21 you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? 22 You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? These questions are all rhetorical. The answer is an assumed “yes.” Much like Jesus who said that lust is equal to adultery and hate is equal to

murder, many rabbis taught the similarly. That's important to keep that in mind when reading the first two questions. The Jews may not **steal**, but they coveted, and that's stealing in spirit (Lk. 12:15; Eph. 5:5). They didn't commit **adultery**, but they lusted (Mt. 5:27-28). Thus, they broke the Law and like James says, "*Whoever breaks one commandment is guilty of breaking them all*" (Jas. 2:10). You have to keep it perfectly in order to be justified by it.

There's a lot of discussion about what Paul means by, "*You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?*" After the exiles to Assyria and Babylon, the Jews no longer struggled with blatant idolatry. They shunned it. But the Gentiles did, and their temples were considered sacred. Fruchtenbaum noted that "not even a crooked Gentile would steal from [a pagan temple]. Consequently, pagan temples were often used as banks, and the people would bring their money to them for safekeeping. Wanting to prove that idols were of no account, some Jews went into these sacred temples and stole the money. If they were successful, it showed that the idols were worthless in protecting the property"³ (cf. Acts 19:27). Then, rather than destroying the idols made from precious metals like God commanded them too (Dt. 7:26), they would melt it down and make money off it. To the Jew's imperfect conscience it may have been "God-honoring" but to the Gentiles it was thievery. It's no different than a Christian doing graffiti in public places. There's a better way to share the gospel than graffiti. But I digress. Paul quotes **Isaiah 52:5**, saying the name of Israel's God is **blasphemed among the Gentiles** because of their hypocrisy. Even the Gentiles could see that the contents didn't match the label. In one instance Jesus called out the Jewish religious leaders saying they were like beautiful, whitewashed tombs on the outside but full of unclean dead men's bones on the inside. "*Outwardly you appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness*" (Matt. 23:27-28). Paul comes to the same conclusion.

C. Interrogation Results: The Jews are condemned for breaking the Law. (vv. 23-24)

He summarizes in v. 23: "*You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?*" That's where he drops the hammer on them and says, "Guilty as charged." Even though they boast in their possession of the Law, they **break it** and **dishonor God**. Instead of "praising God" with their lives, they "dishonor" God. Paul will go on to address other Jewish religious props, but this is Paul's main argument. The overall flow of this section is:

- 1) The doers of the Law will be justified, (2:13)
- 2) However, no one can keep the Law perfectly, not even Jews. (2:23)
- 3) Therefore, by the works of the Law, no one will be justified (3:19-20).

That should be a wrap on the condemnation of the Jews, honestly. However, we're not done. There are still 3 legs left on the chair. Religious people often have more than one religious work they take refuge in. They try to store up salvation points in many ways. A Jew might respond with, "Perhaps I can't take refuge in the Law, but I am circumcised, and that marks me as a child of God."⁴

II. PHYSICAL CIRCUMCISION CANNOT SAVE THE JEW. (2:25-29)

25 For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

When Paul talks about **the letter** or the **letter of the Law** in his writings, he's just referring to the fact that the Old Covenant Law was physically written down by Moses. It's often contrasted with the New Covenant work of the Spirit, who writes the "Law" on the "tablet" of the human heart (2:29; 2 Cor. 3). We don't simply obey an external code of commands but are transformed on the inside by the working of the Spirit. He changes our hearts so that we become obedient from the heart. This internal work of the Spirit is contrasted with the external work of circumcision. **Circumcision** is the symbol of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:1-27). It didn't establish the covenant but was a sign of it. Circumcision was like another label. It identified you as one of Abraham's descendants and allowed you to be part of the community and enter the Temple. All of Abraham's descendants were to be circumcised, thus being identified as one of God's people.

Because of some the foreign policies placed on the Jews by other countries that threatened Jewish existence (scorched-earth Babylon & Antiochus IV Epiphanes; syncretistic Grecian culture/Hellenism) circumcision at the time had become and end all be all for the Jews. Much like Christians getting baptized today, getting circumcised was making a firm statement to all that you were identifying with God's people and therefore was important but unnecessarily became a salvation issue. Like the false hope of many professing Christians with baptism, many Jews pleaded exemption from judgment on the basis of their circumcision (*Sanhedrin* 10:1). A rabbinic saying was, "No circumcised man will be lost."⁵ One Jewish commentary on Genesis said that "Abraham will sit at the entrance to Gehenna [hell], and permit no circumcised Israelite to descend therein."⁶ So, to be circumcised was to be saved. You can see why this was such a debated issue in the newborn church (Acts 15; Galatians). People were saying faith in Christ wasn't enough and you had to be circumcised. But Paul makes the point here that circumcision by itself doesn't matter. It's of zero value if you don't keep the Law since the Law is the basis for getting circumcised in the first place. You might as well not get circumcised. Then Paul makes the point in v. 26:

Uncircumcised law keepers are circumcised and will judge the circumcised.

Look at how Paul turned the tables on them here. The Jew who thinks he's to guide the immature Gentile is now **judged** by the Gentile. Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 12:41-42, that Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah and the Queen of the South who came and responded to the wisdom of Solomon would judge and condemn the religious leaders of Jesus' day because they received greater revelation (the Messiah Himself!) and did not repent. They thought their religious works were good enough. But as Paul makes the point, in God's sight, circumcision minus obedience equals no circumcision. And no circumcision plus obedience equals circumcision. We could say that same about baptism. What matters to God is the reality, not the ritual.⁷ The reality

for the Jew should be that his heart was to be circumcised before anything else (Dt. 10:14-16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4).

Well at this point, the Jew might say, “Well, I was a born a Jew. I’m Abraham’s seed.” That’s what they told Jesus in John 8:33. Paul alludes to the fact that any Jewish externals don’t save:

III. NATURAL BIRTH CANNOT SAVE THE JEW. (2:28-29)

“But he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.”

Just because you are a Jew *outwardly* doesn’t mean you are one *inwardly*. Family heritage—being a descendant of Abraham—doesn’t automatically save you. It’s external, just like circumcision. God is after something *internal* for salvation. What impresses God is not physical circumcision but spiritual circumcision; not natural birth but spiritual birth by the Spirit.

God is after an inward transformation by the Spirit through faith in Christ.

He says the true Jew is the one who is a Jew inwardly. Later on in Romans 9-11 Paul will teach that not every Jew is a true Jew. There is a believing remnant of Israel within ethnic Israel. It’s what I think he calls “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16. He’s distinguishing between Jews who believe and the Jews who don’t believe.⁸ The Jews who believe are sometimes referred to today as Messianic or completed Jews because they’re Jewish inside *and* out. The contents match the label. They’re part of the “true circumcision who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:2-9). As believers, we rejoice in being part of the “true circumcision” as well, and “sons of Abraham” by faith. Those are the ones, Jew or Gentile, who unlike the Pharisees received praise from men, bring **praise to God** and receive **praise from God** (v. 29).

In summary, what Paul said about the Jew in verse 28—“*he is not a Jew who is one outwardly*”—we could say about the true Christian today. *He is not a Christian who is one outwardly*. He is a Christian who is one *inwardly*. If you ask many professing Christians if they’re going to heaven, they tend to respond with external works and labels. “I was raised in such and such a church (name of church). I’m a member of such and such church. I was catechized. I was baptized. I took communion. I was confirmed. I gave money to the church.” Their answer reveals what they’re really trusting in and it’s often not Christ alone. It’s their religious works they’re storing up like salvation points. It’s a religious game: if I just save up enough points, maybe I can win the prize. The sad part is that no one wins at that game because it doesn’t grant salvation and ultimately won’t result in the heart-change—the internal transformation by the Spirit—that God is looking for. The contents will never match the label. And the contents are always more important than the label.⁹ Romans 4:5 says, “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.” Ponder that. Think about it. What are you really

trusting in for your salvation? Christ? Or your religious works? You call yourself a “Christian,” but are you really trusting Christ alone for your salvation? Do the contents really match the label and bring praise to Him? If not, I would encourage you to call on the Lord Jesus Christ to be your Savior this morning. Rely on Him alone for your salvation.

¹ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Romans* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2022), 73.

² Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1973), 90.

³ Fruchtenbaum, *Romans*, 75.

⁴ McClain, *Gospel*, 93

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *Romans*, 77.

⁷ Rene A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 65.

⁸ Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 146.

⁹ S. Lewis Johnson, *Discovering Romans: Spiritual Revival for the Soul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 46.



FALL 2023 // WEEK 2

Life Group Questions

Series: Righteousness Revealed // September 10, 2023

Wrath Against the Religious Jew // Romans 2:16-29

Introduction

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. However, due to your leader's preference or the natural flow of discussion in your group, it should not be expected to cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 10-15 min)*

Since your group is new or growing still, please take some time to introduce yourselves and share one fun or interesting fact about yourself.

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion:

1. Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
 - a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth.
 - b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives unto the glory of God.
 - c. For grace to hear and apply what God's Word is teaching you.
2. Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group or read together as each person takes a couple of verses.

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

Question 1:

Today, Pastor Justin spoke about God's wrath revealed against the religious Jew—the person who thinks he's right with God based on his religious works. How did this religious legalism affect the Jews' view of others? Do you sense any arrogance in the descriptives Paul used in verses 17-20?

What effect does religious legalism have on Christians? (cf. Gal. 3:15) What effect does religious and untransformed legalism have on outsiders? (cf. Rom. 2:23-24)

Question 2:

How does outward reformation through moralism or religious legalism differ from the inward regeneration of the human heart? (cf. Phil. 3:2-9)

Question 3:

Does baptism have any value for the person who does not believe the gospel?

Question 4:

In what ways do you seek praise from men, and in what ways from God (Rom. 2:29)? How would seeking praise only from God affect your actions at home or work? Think of at least one specific way, and act on it.

Prayer *(Suggested time: 10-15 min)*

A significant part of coming together and “connecting” in Christian fellowship is being open and honest with our lives. Praying with a group of people may be new or it may be familiar to you. While we encourage everyone to pray out loud, please do not feel obligated to do so.

Take a few moments to share any prayer requests. Consider praying about what God teaching you through His Word and the recent discussion that seems the most applicable. Consider what you notice about your own relationship with Jesus. Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?